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Lead contamination along Raritan Bay

Plan for Old Bridge boardwalk is postponed

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The proposal to connect the boardwalks that extend along the Raritan Bay in Old Bridge has been postponed indefinitely after lead contamination was found along the Margaret's Creek and Laurence Harbor areas during recent tests, officials said yesterday.

Old Bridge Mayor James Phillips said concentrations of the hazardous metal were found by investigators from the state Department of Environmental Protection when they did soil tests in the spring. In some areas, the lead levels were more than 200 times greater than the acceptable standards for a residential area, reports showed.

Until the extent of the contamination is known and a cleanup is finished, Phillips said, it would be foolhardy to push forward with the plans to build a boardwalk in the Cliffwood Beach section of town to connect with the walkways that exist in Laurence Harbor and Whale Creek.

"The cleanup could change the dimensions of the project and it could change where the boardwalk would be," Phillips said.

Warning signs were posted along the waterfront. Phillips said, however, there is no danger to walk in the area and air quality tests showed no pollution. He said the lead could be ingested and pose a health risk if children picked up fragments, known as "slag," and touched their mouths with their hands.

One Cliffwood Beach homeowner opposed to the boardwalk, Rainer Rothacker, said he hopes the delay will kill the project.

"It could take a few years, but I don't think they'll give up," he said, adding he believed erosion may force the township to abandon the plans entirely.

DEP officials said the contamination was traced to Texas-based NL Industries, which operated the former National Lead paint pig ment manufacturing plant in Sayreville and a refining operation in Perth Amboy.

A letter dated Dec. 7, 1972, from NL to the state DEP said lead residue from the blast furnaces for the Perth Amboy facility was disposed of in Old Bridge. The slag was hauled away by Liberty Trucking Co. to its property off Route 35 in Old Bridge.

But Liberty Trucking Co. is now defunct, according to Ed Putnam, the DEP assistant director of remedial response. He has already contacted NL officials and put them on notice that the company would be held responsible for the costs of the test and cleanup.

"We expect them to step up and take over the case," Putnam said. He said, however, it would be premature to discuss how the cleanup would be done until all of the testing is finished. Putnam said investigators must determine whether the contamination has spread and if it has affected the marine life.

NL executives are expected to meet with DEP officials next month once the tests have been completed. Chris Gibson, an attorney representing NL, said the company "would be happy to meet and discuss ways to figure out what is the scope of the problem." Gibson said NL has no records of disposing of the slag in Old Bridge.

Phillips asked the county freeholders to have Robert Gluck, the county's environmental prosecutor, preview the matter. The county has a stake in the matter because it spent \$5 million from the open space trust to develop the parks along the Raritan Bay.

"I want to make sure the responsible parties pay," Phillips said. He noted NL closed its Sayreville plant more than 20 years ago and the land remains contaminated. Middlesex County is now embroiled in a complex condemnation case to acquire the NL property in Sayreville. As part of the case, the county has reserved \$33 million to cover the cleanup.

"I want to make sure none of that \$33 million is paid until my beachfront is cleaned up," Phillips said.

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